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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 001611

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SUBJECT: UNUSUAL FACTORS IN ASHDOD BOMBINGS INVITE  
SPECULATION ABOUT NEW TURN IN INTIFADA

Classified By: DCM Richard LeBaron for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Several atypical elements of Sunday's dual suicide bombing at the Ashdod port have led Israelis to worry that Hamas and Fatah meant what they said when they announced that the attack, for which the two groups claimed responsibility, signalled a new phase in the Intifada. The attack appeared to be the first in Israel during the current Intifada carried out by Palestinian attackers who entered the country from Gaza. That the attackers targeted economic infrastructure was also unusual for this Intifada. A DAO source at the port confirmed police speculation in the media that the explosives were more powerful and of better quality than those usually deployed in Palestinian terror attacks, thus suggesting a possible foreign origin of the explosives. The source cast doubts, however, on speculation that the attackers could have ruptured or ignited chemical tanks at the port, reporting that the nearest "chemical storage" was at least half a mile from the bombing site. In retaliation for the bombings, the IAF fired missiles at two metal shops in Gaza City overnight, lightly wounding one Palestinian. Critics of Sharon's Gaza disengagement plan will view this attack as evidence that the terror groups are set on creating the impression that Israel is withdrawing from Gaza under fire. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) Two Palestinian teenagers from the Jabalya refugee camp in Gaza killed ten Israelis March 14 in a dual suicide bombing at the port of Ashdod. IDF and port sources told DAO that one of the bombers detonated inside, and one outside, the port facility. According to these sources, port authorities believe that the bomber who detonated outside the facility boosted the other bomber over the fence surrounding the facility at a place where the wire netting on top of the fence had sagged. Each of the bombers then entered, and detonated in, the nearest sites with people inside: a forklift maintenance facility inside the port, and a refrigeration warehouse outside.

3. (C) Hamas and Fatah jointly claimed responsibility for the attack in a message claiming that the attack signalled the "next stage of the armed Intifada." Several apparently unusual or even unprecedented aspects of the attack lent weight to GOI concerns that the attack might indeed represent a qualitatively new turn in terrorist tactics:

-- Whereas attacks on Israeli civilians typically take place against soft targets with the primary goal of killing as many Israelis as possible, the attack in Ashdod, while still murderous in intent, took place at a well-guarded facility of strategic economic value. In attacking, however, the first buildings in which they encountered Israelis, the terrorists did not appear intent on causing maximum economic damage. The symbolic value of hitting a sensitive, economically important target appeared sufficient in this case. (A similar attack that did not succeed was directed in May 2002 at the Pi Glilot fuel storage facility just north of Tel Aviv. In that attack, a bomb surreptitiously placed under a fuel truck exploded inside the storage facility, but failed to detonate any fuel in the truck or the storage tanks.)

-- If in fact the two bombers entered Israel from Gaza, the attack would represent the first time in the current Intifada that any Gazans succeeded in crossing the border fence to carry out an attack within Israel. The Embassy had no indication from the IDF as of mid-day March 15 about the route the bombers might have taken to enter Israel. (Besides getting through or over the Gaza fence, other possible exit routes from Gaza would include being admitted to Israel at the Erez crossing, or entering Israel from the Sinai after crossing from Gaza to Egypt via a tunnel.)

-- A port official told DAO that the bombers used explosives of greater potency and quality than the bombs usually detonated by Palestinian terrorists. He assessed that the explosives were not homemade, thus giving credence to media speculation that the explosives might have come from Hizballah or other sources from outside the territories.

-- Media speculated that the attackers might have sought to rupture storage tanks of bromide or ammonia, or to ignite fuel tanks, thus causing mass casualties in a wide area

around the port. According to DAO sources, however, the bombers detonated in the first buildings they encountered with Israelis inside. These sources said that the nearest "chemical storage" to the site of the bombings was at least half a mile away.

14. (SBU) In response to the Ashdod attack, IAF helicopters fired about ten missiles overnight into two Gaza City metal shops that the GOI alleged were used for producing and storing rockets and other munitions. UNRWA reported that one Palestinian, the owner of one of the shops, was lightly wounded.

15. (C) COMMENT: This atypical attack by Gazans in Israel, coupled with the recent string of attacks at the Erez Crossing, will likely be used to support the case made by those like Military Intelligence Chief Farkash who argue that Sharon's Gaza disengagement plan will provoke intensified terrorism in the run-up to withdrawal. Farkash reportedly assesses that terrorist groups are anxious to duplicate the image from Lebanon in May 2000 of Israel retreating under fire.

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